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US SUPPORT FOR PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA DEFENSE MODERNIZATION--ETC(U)  
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US SUPPORT FOR PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA  
DEFENSE MODERNIZATION

by

Colonel Monte R. Bullard  
Military Intelligence

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# ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: Monte R. Bullard, Col, MI

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*Per: Mrs Ethel M. Denkovich  
AWC Lib'y.*

## US SUPPORT FOR PRC DEFENSE MODERNIZATION

### BACKGROUND

The initial decision to establish a defense relationship with the People's Republic of China was based in part on perceptions heavily influenced by balance of power theory. In the 1970's the Soviet buildup of military forces combined with an aggressive foreign policy clearly exposed intentions that go beyond national self-defense.<sup>1</sup> The threat was so evident that both the United States and China recognized the need for a political demarche which would allow some form of security cooperation to balance the Soviet threat.<sup>2</sup>

During the same period US reliability as an alliance partner was being called into question.<sup>3</sup> More precisely, the entire concept of military alliance treaties was being reviewed.<sup>4</sup> In the eyes of many countries treaty alliances implied a degree of dependence on the United States or, on the other side of that coin, a loss of independence which is an anathema in the post-colonial world of intense nationalism. It became clear that new forms of defense relationships had to emerge. Instead of approaching a new partner in terms of alliance treaties the US began to establish military relationships which were less *formal* than treaties but still retained significant potential in case of a war with the Soviet Union. For example, bilateral security discussions dwelled on exchange programs or relationships which would allow temporary access to airbases or ports in times of emergency.<sup>5</sup>

Chinese perceptions of the Soviet Union also changed during this period. Instead of being viewed as a mere ideological revisionist, their policy of aggressive expansion, described as Soviet hegemonism, was seen as a direct

threat to China's security. This perception was intensified as China lost the battle with the Soviets for influence over Vietnam and as the Soviets gained further influence in India.<sup>6</sup>

US and Chinese perceptions of the Soviet threat recognized that some form of cooperation was in the interest of each. Political normalization in January 1979 established an environment within which cooperative efforts in the defense field could be discussed.<sup>7</sup> In January 1980, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown traveled to China to publically begin the security dialogue. Secretary Brown's trip opened the door for the exchange of delegations in 1980 which included military education, logistics and science and technology. Nineteen-eighty also saw China's senior military spokesman, Geng Biao, make a return visit to the United States.<sup>\*8</sup> During these exchange visits genuinely warm friendships developed between the representatives of both sides and much doubt and misunderstanding fostered by thirty years of isolation was reduced.

One of the principal themes which repeatedly emerged during these delegation visits was the explicit recognition of China's role in a power balance against the USSR. Often it was the Chinese side which brought the topic up as if to rationalize for the American side why the US should support China. The main point made was that the Chinese were tying down fifty Soviet divisions along the Sino-Soviet border; divisions which might otherwise be deployed opposite NATO forces. The Chinese still frequently comment about the desirability of a "United Front" which includes China, the US, Japan and NATO to oppose Soviet hegemonism. They have not, however, defined that united front in precise terms, but it is

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\* At the time of the trip Geng Biao was Secretary General of the Party's Military Affairs Commission. In early 1981 he was appointed Minister of Defense.

clear that they think in terms of a loose coalition designed to balance Soviet power.<sup>9</sup>

The US, on the other hand, entered the process with a degree of uncertainty about the balance. One US school of thought was to join the Chinese in their united front. Another contending viewpoint was held by those who wanted to maintain an equilibrium between China, the US and the USSR.<sup>10</sup> The latter school of thought emphasized the advantages of an "evenhanded" policy which would treat the two communist powers evenly and thus maintain a balance more resembling the classic forms of balance of power. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979 generally forced the US to adopt a policy which in essence was to tilt toward China and in effect follow the united front school. This tilt included such moves as open discussion of defense cooperation in the military field and giving China most-favored-nation treatment in the economic field.<sup>11</sup>

A second major point was China's role in stabilizing events in Southeast Asia. The Chinese point out how the "Counterattack" of February 1979 forced the Vietnamese to deploy main force units along the Sino-Vietnamese border rather than use them in Kampuchea or Thailand. Implicitly the Chinese suggest that they are able to remind the Vietnamese of the potential costs of raising the level of activity in Kampuchea by increasing the tension-level along the Chinese border.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to these two points the Chinese have identified a commonality of US-PRC interests in other parts of the world based upon mutual opposition to Soviet hegemony. For example, they have indicated that they might be able to help the Afghan freedom fighters with material as well as moral support.<sup>13</sup>

There is indeed a broad range of common US-PRC interests, but there are also conflicting interests such as Korea, PRC support for the PLO and

opposition to the US South African policy. The critical area of difference, however, is the Taiwan issue and that will be discussed separately in this paper.

### THE ISSUES

The scope, pace and methods of the Sino-US relationship are yet to be defined. The purpose of this paper is to examine factors which affect decisions on those three policy concerns. There are seven factors which influence the development of the Sino-US defense relationship: (1) the Taiwan issue, (2) the PRC domestic economic situation, (3) the PRC absorptive capacity for advanced technology, (4) PLA military doctrine, (5) perceptions of US allies, (6) the US-Soviet relationship, particularly as manifested in the SALT discussions and (7) long-range ideological compatibility. The first three factors are relatively short-term issues which are likely to change in time. The others are likely to endure.

#### The Taiwan Issue

The Taiwan issue is clearly the most difficult issue in the short-term and the one which currently influences the Sino-US defense relationship most. PRC leaders feel a strong sense of urgency to re-unify the Mainland and Taiwan. <sup>\*14</sup> In 1980 they intensified their peaceful efforts at reunification with suggestions for the opening of postal, transportation and communications routes. They also began to allow Taiwanese consumer goods (TV's and textiles) to be sold openly in mainland stores. The total amount of known trade in 1980 was worth about 320 million US dollars, almost all of which entered China through middlemen in Hong Kong. PRC leaders have offered a number of concessions in an attempt to convince leaders in Taiwan of the need for finding an accommodation formula. They

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\* Note that current rhetoric increasingly uses the term re-unify and avoids the term liberate.

have offered to allow Taiwan to maintain their current economic, political, social and military systems. They have even suggested that Taiwan would be allowed to handle her own foreign relations albeit within some constraints. In August of 1981, Deng Xiaoping was even reported to have offered Taiwan's political elite a share in the PRC leadership in Peking.<sup>15</sup> The PRC is now working to adjust history and ideology to accommodate a reunification. In October 1980 it was announced that in 1981 the PRC would celebrate October 10th, the anniversary of the 1911 revolution headed by Sun Yatsen and the date celebrated annually by the Kuomintang in Taiwan. On May Day 1981, Sun Yatsen's picture was placed in Tiananmen Square in Peking for three days and statues of Sun are being rehabilitated around the country.<sup>16</sup>

The only demands placed on Taiwan were to change the name of The Republic of China and to not use the Kuomintang national anthem or flag.<sup>17</sup> There are even rumors that the PRC may be willing to change her own flag and national anthem to a third set which would be agreeable to leaders on both sides of the straits. Finally there are rumors that the communists are prepared to re-evaluate Chiang Kaishek's role in history to make him a patriotic nationalist, who like Mao made some mistakes.

The Kuomintang leadership, on the other hand, has been intransigent. They have refused the offers of postal, transportation communications connections and have also refused to enter into a dialogue with the PRC leaders.<sup>18</sup> Their own historical experience with the communist party in forming united fronts is still vivid. They point to how the communists took advantage of the relatively peaceful periods of peaceful coexistence to infiltrate and subvert.

Kuomintang organizations. They also recall unfulfilled promises of autonomy to Shanghai businessmen and Tibetan leaders in 1949.<sup>19</sup> While the Taiwan leadership's intransigence is understandable it must be noted that they have not offered any alternative peaceful formula for reunification, even though they too are feeling pressures to move away from the status quo. They only have four options: maintain the status quo; join the Soviet orbit against the PRC (an unlikely proposition); declare independence (not really acceptable to the Kuomintang or communist leadership groups); or to find a formula for reunification.

The communist leaders believe they must hurry to achieve reunification because they believe the popular Chiang Chingkuo, President of The Republic of China in Taiwan, is the only one who could convince Taiwan's inhabitants that accommodation with the mainland is in their interest. As a result they view any support provided to Taiwan by The United States, particularly in the defense area, as an act that will delay reunification by reducing the pressure on the Kuomintang leaders to change the status quo.<sup>20</sup>

The urgency and intensity of Chinese feelings on this issue was communicated to American<sup>s</sup> at all levels in the summer of 1981. Especially frank discussions were held with Senator John Glen and ex-president Jimmy Carter during their visits to China. The Chinese made it clear that the Taiwan issue has a higher priority for them than their own defense modernization. It seems clear that they see the threat to their own security more in terms of ideological ideas than in weapons balances. More specifically they believe Taiwan represents an increasingly successful non-communist Chinese

alternative to their current system. The Chinese have stated unequivocally that any qualitative increase in Taiwan's weapons capability will negate the Sino-U.S. defense relationship. They have also indicated that a mere continuation of defense support to Taiwan will slow any progress in the developing defense relationship with the U.S.<sup>21</sup>

The PRC capability to down play their own defense modernization needs rests in part on their preception of the efficacy of People's War; a topic to be discussed below. It is sufficient to say that the Taiwan factor will continue to be the dominant factor in defining the scope and pace of Sino-U.S. defense ties.

#### Economic Readjustment:

The PRC domestic economic situation has forced China to slow the pace of its modernization efforts. After the Third Plenum of the December 1978 11th Party Central Committee<sup>22</sup> validated modernization as the principal societal task, modernization efforts began to speed up to the point of recklessness. By 1979 the party recognized that spending on capital construction projects had not been well-planned and that China's people were still being neglected. As a result the leaders decided to consolidate their economic position and make sure that economic development was readjusted to proceed within more logically structured plans. At the same time the percentage of investment in heavy industry was reduced in favor of light industry to allow for more consumer goods which would in turn stimulate the total economy and contribute to the motivation of workers.<sup>23</sup> Before the economic readjustment period, even if workers earned more money, there were no consumer items available for purchase. The results are already obvious in department stores and shops throughout China. Consumer

goods are available in much greater quantities and varieties than in 1980.

The impact of economic readjustment on defense modernization was clear from the start. There would be no money available for major weapon's purchases. But that did not really conflict with the military leaders' concepts of how defense modernization should be achieved. Most military leaders agreed, especially in the light of their experience with a withdrawal of Soviet support in the early 1960's, that defense modernization had to be accomplished by themselves. No form of spare-part or logistic dependency on outside power could be tolerated. Therefore the approach would have to be to develop their own capability; that is, as a by-product of total national industrialization. They believed that if national industry were developed under the new coordinated plan, defense modernization would follow automatically. Thus, they decided they would take a temporary cut in the defense budget and at the same time focus on technology transfer which would support the total national modernization effort rather than seek the "quick fix" of immediate weapons systems purchases. This philosophy of self-sufficiency and close coordination with national economic development schemes continues.<sup>24</sup>

#### The Absorptive Capacity:

Very early in the defense modernization process PLA leaders realized that their technical absorptive capacity was extremely limited. The Cultural Revolution had decimated the pool of young people available for training in technical skills. Military leaders acknowledged that even if the U.S. were to give away modern weapons systems, the PLA did not have enough qualified personnel to

handle them.<sup>25</sup> The problem was even more acute in the research and development and engineering production fields where technology generally lagged behind Russia and the U.S. by more than 20 years. While they did have enough competent scientists and engineers to build nuclear weapons, ballistic missile systems and satellites, they did not have sufficient numbers for full-scale defense modernization efforts. In many cases the transition from prototype to weapons production on a large scale was impossible.<sup>26</sup>

The result of the PLA assessment of their absorptive capacity was an emphasis on education and training. Many engineers in defense-related industries were sent to the United States, Japan and Western Europe. There are about six to seven thousand PRC sponsored students now studying in the U.S; many of those are from defense-related industries. They also turned to the U.S. for help in educational and logistics systems/processes, as well as support in dual use technology, which would be required to build an infrastructure to support a domestic defense modernization effort.

#### PLA Military Doctrine:

PLA leaders are completely confident that they can handle any attack on China by The Soviet Union. Further, they believe, as do the Soviets, that they have a credible second-strike nuclear capability and that the probability of nuclear weapons being used in any confrontation is extremely low. They recognize that any Soviet attack using modern conventional weapons systems would cause the PRC to experience great sacrifice in lives and materiel, but they are convinced they could cause the Soviets to bog down after which

their doctrine of people's war would win. Their beliefs were reinforced in the wake of the Soviet inability to control the situation in Afghanistan; where people's war is being waged by relatively inexperienced, poorly organized amateurs.<sup>27</sup> This total confidence in People's War explains why PLA leaders feel no real sense of urgency in modernizing the PLA. Modernization to them only means improving the effectiveness of people's war so they will have to sacrifice less; so they can make the war less protracted. It does not mean to them the building of a major force in the image of NATO or Soviet modern forces. There is no doubt that their doctrine of people's war is defensive in nature and that they believe, correctly or not, that it is adequate for the defense of China.

#### Perceptions of U.S. Allies:

European allies have not expressed concerns about the Sino-U.S. defense relationship in any terms other than as competitors in the race to sell weapons.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the only allies whose sensitivities must be taken into account are Japan and the ASEAN nations.

Japan generally favors U.S. support for Chinese defense modernization as long as the support does not include weapons systems which could threaten Japan. They recognize that a strong stable China is in their interest and that a Sino-Soviet clash would likely affect them directly militarily or indirectly by destroying what Japan now perceives to be a potentially significant market and source of natural resources. Japan, therefore, supports the U.S. in providing China with an increased defensive capability.<sup>29</sup>

The ASEAN countries are a bit more concerned than Japan, but even they are beginning to acknowledge the advantages of a strong

stable China. China's Premier Zhao Ziyang made a trip to Southeast Asia in August 1981 to assure them that China has no aggressive intent in that area and that their principal concern was to resist Soviet expansionism. While ASEAN leaders were not totally convinced that China would stop supporting local communist subversive groups, they did seem to recognize a potential for China's support in stabilizing the area and in helping preclude Soviet intervention.<sup>30</sup> The problem of ASEAN sensitivities can be monitored by watching statements and reactions to the Kampuchean problem. While there is no current opposition by ASEAN members to U.S. support for PRC defensive capabilities, their sensitivities should be a topic of continuous concern to U.S. decision-makers who are defining the limits of defense cooperation.

#### The Soviet-U.S. Relationship:

Current Soviet perceptions are that the U.S. is not likely to supply China with anything that would be an immediate threat to Russia. They are more concerned with political than military implications; they know how far China is behind and they understand the absorptive capacity problem. It is likely, however, that as China becomes stronger they will begin to insist that China is a factor which must be introduced into SALT calculations. They are particularly concerned with China's doctrine which emphasized post nuclear exchange plans. Because of these plans and China's sheer numbers, the Soviets feel they must be prepared to deal with China after they have used all their weapons in an exchange with the U.S. This causes a close scrutiny by the Soviets of the total numbers of strategic weapons

they believe they will need for their security.<sup>31</sup>

Another aspect of the U.S.-Soviet relationship which influences the Sino-U.S. defense relationship is in the direct linkage of U.S. support to China with Soviet aggressive actions such as an attack on Poland. Such direct linkages are more likely to force the Soviets to escalate the arms race than to allow themselves to be intimidated by a stronger China. Thus, this factor also suggests a need for an evenly paced development of the Sino-U.S. defense relationship with assurances that the improvements in the PLA are defensive in nature.

#### The Ideological Factor:

The exact character of the role of ideology in the developing Sino-U.S. relationship is not clear because China's communist ideology is evolving so rapidly. While Marxist-Leninist rhetoric is still extremely strong, there is no doubt that many actual policies are not in accord with pure Marxian philosophy. Chinese ideology is like a boat adrift searching for a direction. Genuine capitalistic and democratic practices are creeping into the system. Even in periods of ideological tightening, such as the first nine months of 1981, capitalistic and democratic practices continue to survive and develop.

The internal debate over ideological direction and the future role of the Communist Party is clearly a topic requiring close scrutiny. Because of the highly centralized system a return to ideological orthodoxy is always possible. A failure in the current economic reforms could easily call for a discarding of Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic approach to economic development and the return of strict

Marxist-Leninist guidelines.

The most severe manifestation of the ideological factor is likely to be internal and institutional. As the modernization process proceeds, the government or enterprise sector (technocrats/intellectuals) are likely to come into conflict with the poorly educated PLA and party elites. This will be particularly true as the technocrats begin to take over economic decision-making in the interest of efficiency. As Party leaders are forced out of leading roles they could turn to the equally uneducated PLA leadership (whose role has already been diminished) for support in re-establishing their position of authority. This would be especially likely if the economy took a severe downturn. This potential institutional instability must be considered in U.S. efforts to develop the defense relationship for if the process is not handled properly the U.S. could easily contribute to exacerbation of the gap between the educated technocrats (with whom the U.S. representatives come into contact and support as a natural part of the process) and the lesser-educated leaders in the PLA and The Party who owe their positions to loyalty to an ideology.

#### Conclusions:

The seven factors described above suggests that the U.S. needs a comprehensive plan for the development of a defense relationship with China. It is clear that a stable and strong, defense-oriented China is in the best interest of the United States. It is also clear that there is a great opportunity now for the U.S. to influence China's ideological development toward some form more compatible with that of the U.S. The U.S. must, however, be careful to not push too hard or too fast in any direction.

As a more concrete level, it would seem prudent for the U.S. to place initial emphasis on the education and training element of the defense relationship as opposed to weapons sales or transfer. The Chinese have identified education and training as their priority task and from an ideological perspective it would seem prudent to educate more PLA leaders through the International Military Education and Training programs to close the institutional gap with the technocrats. There is a need for more highly educated PLA leaders to bridge the gap between institutions and reduce the potential for instability.

It is also important for the U.S. military to get to know the Chinese military and their system better before the transfer of large amounts of relatively modern weapons systems. The reasons are patently obvious.

Finally, while the U.S. cannot control these factors it is clear that we must understand them to develop an effective U.S. policy. A carefully orchestrated approach which considers the seven factors in detail could lead to the development of a People's Republic of China defense establishment which could make a significant contribution to peace and stability in the world and to a China ideologically more compatible with the U.S. in the long term.

# FOOTNOTES

1. Harold Brown, Department of Defense Annual Report-Fiscal Year 1981, Section I, Chapter 4.
2. Richard Solomon, Choices for Coalition Building, p. V.
3. Ibid, pp. 36-39.
4. For example: Alan N. Sabronsky "Allies, Clients, and Encumbrances," International Security Review, summer 1980
5. Hermann Eilts, "Security Considerations in the Persian Gulf," International Security, pp. 79-113.
6. Interview with Jiang Youshu, Secretary General, Beijing Institute of Strategic Studies, 9 September 1981.
7. Harold Brown, p. 52.
8. Author participated in each of these delegations to include accompanying Geng Biao in The United States.
9. These points have been made in almost all contacts between senior PLA officers and U.S. military officials.
10. Robert Scalapino, "Approaches to Peace and Security in Asia: The Uncertainty Surrounding American Strategic Principles," Current Scene, August, September 1978.
11. Harold Brown, p. 52.
12. Tension along the border continues as reflected in recent newspaper and radio accounts such as FBIS report 081543 September 1981 from Hanoi Radio in English which described "PRC Armed Provocations in 2 weeks since 24 August."
13. Interview with Jiang Youshu, 9 September 1981.
14. PRC Leaders discussions with American Leaders continuously stress this point. It was a central theme in recent (Summer 1981) talks between Chinese leaders and American travelers to China to include: Zbigniew Brzezinski, Senator John Glenn and Former President Jimmy Carter.
15. Michael Parks, "Peking Reportedly Broadens Basis For Talks With Taiwan," Herald Tribune, (Hong Kong) 15 September, 1981. pp. 1-2
16. Statues of Sun Yat-sen, under repair were observed by author in Wuhan and Lanzhou. Sun Yat-sen Memorial in Nanjing has also been re-opened after extensive renovation.

17. Parks, pp. 1-2.
18. Parks, Ibid.
19. Interviews with military and political leaders in Taiwan in 1978.
20. Interview with Zhang Bingyu, Deputy Director, Foreign Affairs Bureau, Ministry of National Defense, People's Republic of China.
21. Interview with Zhang Naizheng, Division Chief, FAB, MND, 9 September 1981.
22. FBIS Analysis Report, "Chinese Leadership Conference and CCP Plenum, November-December, 1978 Ratification of The Modernization Program," Confidential, 1 February 1979.
23. U.S. Embassy Peking, Economic Section Report, "Economic Trends of The People's Republic of China, "October 20, 1980.
24. Interviews with PLA officials in Guangzhou, Kunming, Chengdu and Xinjiang Military Regions in the spring and summer of 1981.
25. Ibid.
26. Briefings during logistics, (December 1980), Science and Technology (September 1980) and education (May 1981) delegation visits to the PRC.
27. Interview with Tao Hanzhang, Deputy Commandant, PLA Military Academy in May 1981. PLA Military Region leaders also reflected these beliefs.
28. Discussions with military attaches stationed in Peking from England, France, Italy and West Germany during August and September 1981.
29. Discussion with Japanese Military Attache to China, August 1981.
30. Discussions with Military Attache from Thailand, August 1981.
31. See Banning Garrett, "Soviet Perceptions of China and Sino-American Military Ties-Implications for The Strategic Balance And Arms Control", June 1981.

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3. Garrett, Banning. "Soviet Perceptions of China and Sino-American Military Ties-Implications for the Strategic Balance and Arms Control; A Report Prepared for SALT/Arms Control Support Group, Office of Assistant Secretary of Defense (Atomic Energy)," The Pentagon, June 1981.
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6. Scalapino, Robert. "Approaches to Peace and Security in Asia: The Uncertainty Surrounding American Strategic Principles," Current Scene. Hong Kong: United States Consulate General, volume XVI. Numbers 8 and 9, August and September 1978.
7. Salomon, Richard. Choices for Coalition Building: Santa Monica, California: Rand Corporation. P-6572, April 1981, p. V.

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2. Zhang Bingyu. Deputy Director, Foreign Affairs Bureau, Ministry of National Defense, People's Republic of China. Peking: 9 September 1981.
3. Zhang Naizheng. Division Chief, FAB, MND: 9 September 1981.
4. Interviews with Military Attaches from England, France, Western Germany, Italy, Japan and Thailand. Peking: August and September 1981.

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